

Image-making with the Landscape: Between Representation and Reification

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This paper examines how landscapes emerge through the entangled mediations of smartphone image-making, embodied sensing, and shared social interpretation. Drawing on material from participatory workshops conducted in Helsinki (Finland) and Covilhã (Portugal), the study investigates how technologically mediated practices co-constitute the world, revealing relational, affective, and often occluded layers of the landscape that surface through the act of photographing. In contrast to approaches that analyse images as stable representations, this paper foregrounds image-making itself as a dynamic and constitutive mode of being-with landscape. Through a postphenomenological lens, I argue that the smartphone does not simply document terrain but actively shapes the conditions through which landscape is perceived, negotiated, and understood.

The project reflects on how visual technologies both reveal and obscure the spatial, social, and political forces that contour everyday environments. The smartphone participates materially and symbolically in the emergence of the landscapes explored in this research: its screen reframes attention; its sensors collect data; its interface scripts bodily motion; and its algorithmic processing generates visual outputs that recalibrate what counts as a meaningful view. These operations create layers of landscape that stay partially concealed yet remain constantly active; geographies that are veiled not because they are invisible, but because they emerge only through specific technological connections.

The empirical basis of the paper derives from workshops designed to enhance visual literacy by encouraging participants to walk, observe, and photograph local landscapes with their smartphones. Rather than treating participants' images as fixed artefacts for analysis, the study attends to the discussions that emerged after fieldwork, in which participants reflected on their encounters and how photographing shaped them. These discussions, recorded and analysed qualitatively, reveal how

smartphone mediation draws out underlying spatialities and intensifies perception in ways that exceed the visual content of the photographs themselves.

In Kalasatama (Helsinki), participants responded strongly to the dense mix of urban development, surveillance infrastructures, and controlled pedestrian flows. Ordinary objects were read through the smartphone screen as ambiguous, even threatening, blurring into perceived surveillance cameras and producing discomfort. This ambiguity, heightened by the camera's framing, triggered hidden layers of monitoring and control woven into the built environment. As participants noted, the awareness of being watched altered their bodily comportment and emotional state, evoking what postphenomenology describes as aesthetic embodiment: a sensing-with the landscape in which technological and environmental elements co-shape expressive and affective experience.

Participants also reflected on the smartphone itself as a device that both participates in and extends systems of surveillance. Comments comparing falling snow to data streams demonstrated how the smartphone renders visible otherwise imperceptible layers of digital governance, data extraction, and algorithmic monitoring. Here, the latent geography is not merely physical but also infrastructural and political. It emerges through the participants' technologically mediated imagination of the environment as a 'datafied' space. The smartphone becomes both a tool for uncovering these relations and an actor embedded within them.

In Covilhã (Portugal), by contrast, participants encountered an abandoned industrial valley where derelict factories, decaying paths, and overgrown vegetation produced a radically different set of relations. Here, image-making highlighted the temporal and affective layers of the landscape, including cycles of industrialisation and decline, memories of labour, familial histories, and the slow reclamation of the built environment by natural processes. Walking itself became an intersubjective and aesthetically embodied event, requiring crouching, stepping over debris, and adjusting bodily orientation around obstacles. The smartphone camera, held in the hand, shaped these movements while simultaneously recording them, producing what postphenomenology terms co-constitution: a process through which subject, technology, and landscape emerge together. These encounters demonstrate that

underlying spatial patterns are not just concealed layers waiting to be uncovered; they are realised through relational practices and technological mediation.

Across both sites, the workshop discussions foregrounded intersubjectivity as essential to how landscapes appear. Building on recent expansions of postphenomenology (Rosenberger, Claassen, Ritter, Kaplan), the analysis emphasises that technologically mediated experience is never purely individual. Participants continuously referenced shared cultural knowledge, political concerns, bodily vulnerabilities, and personal memories. These forms of collective interpretation shaped the emergence of the landscapes as much as the smartphone did. These veiled meanings inherent in the landscape emerge through shared technological becoming: the mutual shaping of perception by devices, bodies, and social imaginaries.

The paper argues that image-making with the smartphone provides a distinctive methodology for studying the landscape because it makes visible and discussable the multisensory, intersubjective, and political processes through which landscape meaning emerges. Instead of examining the images, the project reveals that landscape meaning can emerge through the image-making practices. The meaning emerges through the gestures of holding the device, the limitations of the interface, the sensory intensities of walking, and the social exchanges through which participants express their experiences.

Finally, I reflect on how such methods can contribute to broader visual-cultural and geographical understandings of the concept of landscape in technologically saturated environments. By situating image-making as a form of being-with landscape, the project offers a way to critically engage the material, digital, affective, historical, and political terrains that structure contemporary life but often remain hidden in plain sight.